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LETTER DATED 1 MAY 1997 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to refer to resolution 1076 (1996) on the situation in Afghanistan, which was adopted by the Security Council on 22 October 1996, and to my report of 16 March 1997 (S/1997/240). In paragraph 24 of that report I expressed my belief that the United Nations and its Member States had to increase efforts to address the Afghan question before the situation deteriorated even further. I underlined that it was necessary for all of us to coordinate our efforts so as to increase international pressure on the Afghan parties to solve the conflict in a peaceful way. To that end, I suggested that I might convene another meeting of concerned countries, using the formula that had been adopted for the meeting held in New York on 18 November 1996.

At my request, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. Kieran Prendergast, presided over such an informal consultative meeting in New York on 16 April 1997. Representatives of China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America, Uzbekistan and the Organization of the Islamic Conference participated.

The purpose of the meeting was to reassess the situation following recent political and military developments and to discuss how best to promote a negotiated settlement of the conflict and reinforce the United Nations peacemaking efforts.

The meeting demonstrated that consensus continues to exist on the grave dangers of continued armed conflict for the region and on the central role of the United Nations in coordinating efforts to achieve a peaceful solution. The participants uniformly appreciated the efforts of Mr. Norbert Holl and of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan to promote agreement on a ceasefire and negotiations between the factions. While recognizing the need for all concerned countries to be involved in the search for peace, they also stressed that such initiatives should be coordinated with the United Nations.

All participants agreed that the territorial integrity and unity of Afghanistan must be preserved. They supported the view that the only solution to the conflict remains a national accord based on recognition of the legitimate interests and rights of all the Afghan people. There was consensus that all forms of foreign interference must cease, although, as usual, there were differences on how to achieve this. The flow of arms into Afghanistan remained a preoccupation and a number of countries supported an arms embargo, referring to the action taken in that connection by the European Union; some called for the Security Council to take similar action. Others, however, expressed doubts about the practical effectiveness of such a measure and whether it could be applied in an even-handed manner.

There continued to be widespread support for an international conference in due course to support the results of negotiations. A number of concrete proposals were put forward for an intra-Afghan dialogue under the auspices of the United Nations to be held outside Afghanistan, possibly with Member States as observers. Several participants repeated their offer to host negotiations and/or a conference. Many favoured the expansion of United Nations consultations beyond the leadership of the factions to include broadly representative Afghan communities and personalities. Some particularly supported the intensification of the contacts of Mr. Holl and the Special Mission with concerned States.

A number of delegations favoured the increased involvement of the Security Council in the issue. In the meantime, many expressed the view that the meeting mechanism which I had initiated in November 1996, of which this was the second instance, was a useful international framework which could meet more frequently, even every two months.

I should note the expressions of several of the participants on the desirability of a more spontaneous exchange of views at these meetings, as well as the interest of some in giving the deliberations a sharper focus. I am reflecting on how we might address those concerns together.

All participants voiced their distress at the continued plight of the Afghan people, with special attention drawn to women and girls. Several emphasized the connection between a political settlement, rehabilitation, reconstruction and peace-building. I look forward to exploring further how we can best harmonize and coordinate policies in the future for the maximum benefit of the Afghan people.

I should be grateful, Mr. President, if you would convey this information to the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) Kofi A. ANNAN